

**Thank you for inviting me to speak to your conference today.**

**It is perhaps not widely known that I hold the CQSW. Indeed, I was a practice teacher for many years in community settings in the 1970's.**

**I trained at a time of almost unbounded optimism for social work and what we might achieve as a profession. A great deal has changed since then, of course.**

**The training and education of social workers has changed beyond recognition; the introduction of protected title has transformed the regulation of practice and the nature and size of the workforce has developed significantly. It is undoubtedly the case that social work is an older and a wiser profession.**

**But some things don't change. The expectations of the public are still very high, not only in general terms but also in respect of individual social workers; the contribution of social workers is still undervalued; and social workers still do not**

speaking with the confidence and authority of other professional groups.

More importantly, one of the distinguishing features of social work as it has grown and adapted over recent years has been the way that it has, by and large, stayed true to its core values. These are captured by the *International Federation of Social Workers'* definition of social work. No doubt many of you know this off by heart but just in case, I will remind you. According to the IFSW,

*“The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being.”*

The IFSW definition goes on to say that,

*“Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. ... Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action.”*

**I wonder how many of you have raised this at recent meetings of your senior management team or have considered the relevant Performance Indicator for the purposes of member scrutiny?**

**Do not misunderstand me. I am not naive about the day to day demands of your work. I know as well as you do how the press and the public hold you to account and on what basis. I know how personally demanding your work is. Indeed, I take every opportunity to celebrate your resilience, your dedication and your commitment to public service in some of the most unpopular causes and I want to offer you my continued respect, congratulations and support today.**

**It puts our political angst into perspective as we weather the storms of public opinion in these uncertain times, economically and politically.**

**But it is critical to remember, in social work and in politics, the importance of the 'big Ideas' that inform our work. It is the big ideas that drove us to take up the work in the first place**

**and it is the big ideas that keep us there, even if we don't talk about them as much as we should do.**

**In your work as leaders and champions for social work in and my work as a politician and as a Minister it is useful to remind ourselves sometimes of just what those big ideas are.**

**For both of us, human rights and social justice are two of the most important.**

**In my work as Minister for Children and Education, I am committed to a mode of education that respects the whole person across the life course. In Wales, we are not narrowly focussed on 'intellectual excellence or 'skills for economic prosperity' (although these are vitally important). Our vision for education includes a commitment to the development of a coherent, robust and imaginative framework for qualifications, exemplified by the Welsh Bac.**

**But our vision goes wider and extends from the Foundation Phase to Adult and Community Learning; from the earliest years to the third age.**

Our focus is on education for all; our vision is inclusive, extends to everyone irrespective of ability or background and contributes not just to enhanced opportunities for the individual but also contributes towards a more informed democracy and a just society. I strongly believe in an education system that creates space for the voice of the learner, the expertise of the teacher and the participation of local interests and communities.

Our vision for education is not driven by simplistic measures of what can be measured simply. We have rejected competition as the basis for school improvement and chosen co-operation as the best way forward. It may be that our colleagues elsewhere in the UK are beginning to share many of our views on this.

Our school effectiveness framework has a clear vision of the purpose of schools that is progressive, participatory and distinctively Welsh. At the heart of the SEF is a statement of the *National Purpose of Schools* which aims to

*enable all children and young people to develop their full potential by acquiring skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes, including personal, social and emotional skills, to enable them to become economically, socially and personally active citizens and lifelong learners;*

The mention of children and young people as citizens is vital here. It is an echo of the rights based approach that we have taken to the making and delivery of children and young people's policy in Wales.

More than 5 years ago, on the 14th January 2004, the National Assembly for Wales unanimously,

*Reaffirm[ed] the priority which it attaches to safeguarding and promoting the rights and welfare of children and young people in Wales, particularly those who are vulnerable;*

[and]

*Formally adopt[ed] the United Nations convention on the rights of the child as the basis of policy making in this area ...*

It should be noted incidentally that this debate had taken place in the context of the post-Climbié period of high anxiety about children's services that was taking place throughout the UK. For the Welsh Assembly Government, the CRC has been the organising principle behind much of what we have sought to do for children and young people since that time.

This is what 'safeguarding' means in the Welsh context - an inseparable relationship between welfare and rights with rights being the guarantor of welfare, for everyone, including and especially those who are vulnerable.

Our 'rights perspective' has deep roots in an established collectivist and non-conformist political tradition which is embedded in a history and economic structure that is very different from England and Scotland.

**It also reflects a particular model of the welfare state. In Wales, there is a strong belief, which I share, that government can be good for people; that it must be accountable and collaborative rather than competitive; that the integrated, universal welfare state is critical to the pursuit of social justice, that citizenship is a desirable social and political end and that participation across the whole of civil society, including children and young people, is key to good governance.**

**As you will know, the CRC has been translated into the Seven Core Aims in Wales. The Seven Core Aims run right through the planning process that leads to the single children and young peoples' plans that have been developed locally. This is a model that suits the Welsh context; where agencies are brought together to focus on service planning for children and young people but which sees them in the context of their local communities and which takes account of the whole of their lives – not just those parts of children's lives that adults define as troubled or troublesome.**

Our rights perspective is based on a very positive appreciation of what children and young people can do for themselves, each other and the communities in which they live. It focuses on their strengths and not on their weaknesses. Perhaps the best example of what I mean by this is illustrated by the work that the WAG has done to support participation:

Participation is described in *Rights in Action* as 'one of our greatest successes' (p. i) and Wales can, with some justification, be said to have led the world in promoting children and young people's active citizenship. Defined, by a young person as part of a national competition as,

*Participation means that it is my right to be involved in making decisions, planning and reviewing action that might affect me. Having a voice, having a choice.*

This definition is the basis of national 'Participation Standards' that have been developed with young people by the Assembly Government funded Participation Unit (hosted by Save the Children), itself part of a Participation

**Consortium, a multi-agency, strategic body working across Wales 'to develop capacity and practice in terms of the participation of children and young people in decision making in Wales'. Work is underway to develop a national 'kite mark' system that will apply the standards to all aspects of services for children, including service planning and inspection.**

**The standards have been endorsed by the influential 'Funky Dragon', the children and young people's Assembly for Wales. Funky Dragon, substantially funded by the Assembly Government, is a young person led organisation which aims 'to give 0-25 year olds the opportunity to get their voices heard on issues that affect them'**

**I have to say that as well as being based on a coherent, positive and progressive understanding of the place of children and young people in society, participation is also very, very practical. Take, for example, the work that Funky Dragon did ahead of the latest round of reporting to the UN Committee on the CRC.**

In a quite exceptional enterprise, a Steering Group of young people designed a survey that was completed by 14,000 young people across Wales aged from 7-18 that sought to answer a basic question; 'To what extent are you able to access your rights?'. The two reports that resulted from the survey, *Our Rights, Our Story* (based on the survey of 11-18 year olds) and *Why do people's ages go up not down?* (7-10 year olds) were presented, in person, by a delegation from Funky Dragon, to the CRC Committee in Geneva.

Moreover, for the first time in the UK of which I am aware, the young people's delegation was invited to make their presentation to a cabinet committee meeting of the Assembly Government. Whilst the findings of both reports made uncomfortable reading in some respects, the process whereby young people were able to directly contribute to defining the policy agenda and to engage with government at the highest level offers the continuing prospect of being able to deliver our joint ambitions. I strongly recommend both reports to you if you have not read them already.

There are other examples of how participation is shaping the children's agenda in Wales; in schools, Wales is unique in the UK in having made school councils a statutory requirement in 2006; the *Education (Wales) Measure* currently before the Senedd will give young people a statutory right, in their own name, to make special educational needs appeals and claims of disability discrimination to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales.

There is a great deal that is progressive in the ambitions and achievements of the rights project in Wales and the sense of the children's agenda in Wales being with and for children rather than about them is very close to the surface but it has been sustained by a relatively stable structure for delivering services that is not been the case elsewhere in the UK.

Translating the broad policy framework of the Assembly Government into direct services has relied, as already suggested, on a strong political investment in local government and, in particular, in social services departments. The vision for social services, expressed in *Fulfilled Lives, Supportive Communities: Improving social services in Wales*

**from 2008 - 2018 (WAG, 2007) places local government in a 'central role' and in a 'strong position to lead change' (p. 5).**

**The overall vision is a familiar one; services must be (p. 6):**

- **Strong, accessible and accountable;**
- **Focused on citizen, family and community needs;**
- **Focused on social inclusion and the rights of individuals;**
- **Concerned with good outcomes;**
- **Delivered in a joined up, flexible and efficient way to consistently high standards and in partnership with service users.**

**This has resulted, in the main, in fully integrated social services departments; In essence, a 'family service' model. This approach is strongly reflected in a major piece of Welsh law that is currently making its passage into legislation. The Measure, *The Children and Families (Wales) Measure*, introduced by the Government on 2nd March 2009, is centrally concerned with legislating for Wales' distinctive child poverty strategy (well ahead of broadly similar Westminster proposals) but includes the legislative framework for the**

**introduction of 'Integrated Family Support Teams' in every local authority in Wales, after 'pioneer' phase in selected areas.**

**In part, the idea for the IFSTs arises from a concern with rising numbers entering care (and this preceded the 'Baby Peter' effect on the population of looked after children), especially from those families where the adults themselves are facing major challenges of their own through substance misuse or mental health problems, for example.**

**The IFSTs are intended specifically to address the 'suggestion' that services in Wales may 'become preoccupied with identifying and managing risk rather than identifying protective factors that might avoid the development of problems' (p. 21). The implied contrast with elsewhere in the UK is not unintentional.**

**It is understanding this simple proposition that children and young people need to be seen in the context of their families and their communities that is critical to understanding the differences emerging across the UK as far as children's**

services are concerned. We are committed to integrated social services departments with a strong, confident professional lead given by the Director of Social Services.

In my view, it is those things that bind children to their families and communities that are more important than those things which bind them to each other. Elsewhere in the UK, that may not be the case and there we see models not of integrated services around children but of segregated services for children. I share the views of the National Audit Office on the role of Children's Trusts.

In Wales, we see children in terms of their rights as much as their needs. We recognise their strengths as well as their vulnerabilities. We take on board the problems that we cause for them as well as those problems that they cause for the rest of us. We believe in policies that are proactive and not reactive (or knee-jerk). We have a clear set of objectives for children and young people's services (which are NOT the same as 'outcomes'). We value stability in the delivery of services rather than a constantly changing set of structures and professional networks. We believe in a strong public

sector at the heart of a strong welfare state. We talk a language of justice, equality and participation and not a language of competition, business and consumerism. Our model of children and young people is confident, positive, imaginative and optimistic.

At the heart of this is a recognition of the essential nature of childhood itself and an ambitious set of expectations that fall to us as politicians, professionals and simply as adults.

Amongst the concluding observations of the UN CRC Committee, I was particularly pleased to find the following:

*The Committee welcomes the commitment of the National Assembly in Wales to prohibiting all corporal punishment in the home, but notes that under the terms of devolution it is not possible for the Assembly to enact the necessary legislation. The Committee is concerned at the failure of State party to explicitly prohibit all corporal punishment in the home and emphasises its view that the existence of any defence in cases of corporal punishment of children does not*

*comply with the principles and provisions of the Convention, since it would suggest that some forms of corporal punishment are acceptable.*

It is a widely shared hope that Wales will be the first part of the UK to end corporal punishment in the home.

Secondly, safeguarding is a whole community obligation and it begins with a commitment to childhood itself. Central to the experience of childhood is play. This is recognised in the CRC (Art. 31) and by the Committee which, in its 2008 *Concluding Observations* (§ 68) expressed itself concerned that

*... with the sole exception of Wales, the right to play and leisure is not fully enjoyed by all children in the State party, especially due to poor play infrastructures, notably for those children with disabilities. The Committee is also concerned that the steady reduction in playgrounds occurred in recent years has the effect to push children into gathering in public open spaces,*

*a behaviour that – however – may be seen as anti-social according to the ASBOs*

Wales was amongst the first countries in the world to publish a play policy (October 2002). This was supplemented by an Action Plan in February 2006 and legislation currently making its way through the Senedd will impose a duty on local authorities to make and publish an assessment of 'play sufficiency' in their areas.

The choices facing government rarely resolve themselves into such stark alternatives; playgrounds or ASBOs? But such choices do have to be made at one level. The choice that has been made in Wales is one that suits our political traditions and political culture. It is one that reflects a particular sense of the nature and role of the welfare state and it is one that is progressive, optimistic and right for 'our' young people.

I hope that you enjoy the rest of your conference and that you remember why you and I are doing what we do.